

Livelihood Sustainability of Handloom Weavers in Manipur: The Prospect and Challenges

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Abstract

Handloom is the source of livelihood to several million of artisans and their families. Sustainability is the ability of individuals or communities to maintain and improve their means of livelihood. The main objective of this paper is to study the prospects and problems of livelihood sustainability of handloom weaver in Leimapokpam Village, Manipur, India. Leimapokpam Village in Manipur is known for Wangkhei Phee weaving in Manipur. The study is based on qualitative data, Data were collected from 100 respondent wangkheiphee weavers through convenient Sampling. The Study has used the sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) for the data collection. SLF is an approach which has gained acceptance, it is a tool for analysing the level of development and creating new initiatives for future growth. The questionnaire included both close and open-ended questions. The study shows the ability of individual weaver to maintain and improve their means of living. The cultural heritage of Manipur is also represented by handloom and handicraft items in textiles sector. Manipuri handlooms sari has its own unique place in the demand segment of sari in India. The locally specific handloom products namely Wangkhei Phee, Rani Phee, Mayek naibi, Khudei, Pheijom which are worn in rituals, festival, ceremonies, fashion show are in great demand and in fashion trend too. The handloom sector gives employment to the number of population and also contributes to the state economy. It was further observed that all the studied weavers relied on middle men for marketing their products. Wangkhei phee being a Geographical Indication (GI) Tag product can have more marketing prospects at the national and international level. Sari is a common Indian attire and have avenue in fashion and daily wear so wangkhei sari can boost the weaver's livelihood better.

Keywords: Framework, Livelihood, Manipur, Sustainability, Wangkhei phee Weavers

1. Introduction

Handloom weaving is a key aspect of socio-economic life in Manipur especially among the women. Manipur holds a special place in India's handloom landscape, boasting one of the highest concentrations of weavers and looms in the country (**Kiran Soibam & K Angela Lalhmingsangi, 2024**). In India the handloom sector is one of the largest economic activity sectors after agriculture, providing direct and indirect employment to more than four million weavers and allied workers (**Jhulan Barik, 2025**). North East India accounts for more than 65 percent of the total handloom households in India (**Kishor Goswami & et al, 2017**). Handloom weaving provides livelihoods for thousands of people, often empowering women in rural areas.

Livelihood means how people meet their everyday needs and respond to social, economic and environmental change. (**Shruti Sudha Mishra & A.K. Das Mohapatra, 2020**) Handloom is the source of

livelihood to several millions of artisans and their families all over the world. So, from handloom sector many are directly or indirectly generating an income for livelihood as well for sustainability. Sustainability is making a living that should be viable not just today but also for future generations without exhausting resources or harming social and environmental systems. Handloom weaving has long been an essential aspect of India's social and cultural fabric, allowing ethnic groups to convey their distinct identities and artistic legacy in their products (**Devbrath & Kriti Bhaswar Singh, 2025**). In the national and international market Manipuri handloom and handicraft products is having a place because of its uniqueness particularly handlooms sari. Locally specific products namely wangkhei phee, rani phee, mayeknaibi, khudei, pheijom, lai gi phee and other handicrafts items are commonly used in rituals, festival and other celebrations. Manipur is renowned for its exquisite handloom products that are woven with intricate

designs and vibrant colours (**Gour Gopal Banik & Neeta Longjam, 2023**).

In Manipur especially in rural areas loom is a prized possession of women and has been a way of life in the state. The skill of weaving is passed on to them from older family members. The younger women assisted in weaving and related activities learnt the skill by being a helping hand. In the state weaving activity is largely household based and labour intensive, sometimes employing all the family members in the production process. The women weavers of the region perform multiple roles as handloom producers and traders of handloom products. As there are no clothmills or many powerlooms in the region, weavers put in their strict labour by working manually (**Souvik Mukherjee, 2025**). But, factors like competition from better/ cheap/ substitute products, importing of raw materials from outside the state, marketing through middle men, changing market structure and price fluctuation, changing technology and skill, and vulnerabilities are challenging for weaver's livelihood.

So, it is imperative to analyse the vulnerabilities and challenges of weavers so that there is a better way towards livelihood sustainability. The British Department for International Development (DFID) has developed a 'Sustainable Livelihood Framework' (SLF) and most widely used livelihoods frameworks in development practice. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) also referred to as Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) developed primarily in the late 1990s remains a popular approach employed by development practitioners to help maximize the effectiveness of interventions designed to support disadvantaged communities (**Stephen Morse, 2025**). SLF is a feasible theoretical instrument to understand the livelihoods of the rural population (**Nazneen Akhtar, 2019**). SLA is a new approach which has gained acceptance, it is a tool for analysing the level of development and creating new initiatives for future growth. It is widely used in study of livelihoods of the poor, under developed, destitute and come up with sustainable solutions as per the requirements of the people (**Anjali Yadav, 2019**).

The elements of the framework are:

Vulnerability context, The vulnerability context frames the external environment in which people exist, these are those factors which people have limited or no control, but have a great influence on people's

livelihood. It emerges when human beings have to face harmful threat or shock with inadequate capacity to respond effectively.

Livelihood assets, SLF identifies five types of assets or capitals upon which livelihoods are built. The livelihoods approach is concerned first and foremost with people. It seeks to gain an accurate and realistic understanding of people's strengths (assets or capital endowments) and how they endeavour to convert these into positive livelihood outcomes. The asset pentagon includes human capital, social capital, natural capital, physical capital and financial capital.

Human capital represents the skills, knowledge, ability to work and good health condition that together enable people to pursue different livelihood strategies and achieve their livelihood objectives.

Social Capital is networks, relationships, and community support that increase people's trust and ability to work together and expand their access to wider institutions, such as political or civic bodies.

Financial Capital denotes the financial resources namely income, savings, and access to credit. It is the availability of cash or equivalent, which enables people to adopt different livelihood strategies.

Physical Capital comprises the basic infrastructure and producer goods needed to support livelihoods. These are infrastructure, tools, and technology namely affordable transport, secure shelter and buildings, adequate water supply and sanitation, clean, affordable energy and access to information (communications).

Natural Capital comprises of land, water, and other environmental resources. Natural capital is very important to those who derive all or part of their livelihoods from resource-based activities (farming, fishing, gathering in forests, cattle grazing etc.).

Policies, Institutions and Processes determine access to various types of capital, livelihood strategies and decision-making bodies and source of influence. An absence of appropriate structures and policies can be a major constraint to development.

Livelihood Strategies, Livelihood strategies are the range and combination of activities and choices that people make/undertake in order to achieve their livelihood goals. The livelihoods approach seeks to promote choice, opportunity and diversity. It denotes the range and combination of activities and choices

that people make/undertake in order to achieve their livelihood goals (including productive activities, investment strategies, reproductive choices, etc.).

Livelihood Outcomes are the achievements or outputs of livelihood strategies, such as more income, increased well-being, reduce vulnerability, improved food security and a more sustainable use of natural resources.

SLF embodies an epistemological position that values local knowledge, engages with local people and, seeks to 'put the last first' (Nithya Natarajan & et al, 2022). The sustainable livelihoods approach encourages thinking out of the box. It invites them to look at contexts and relationships so that development activities can become more process-oriented (Olivier Serrat, 2008).

2. Review of Literatures

Supriya Dam & et al, (2025) expressed that 51 handloom units, including weavers and craftspeople faced several financial challenges, including a lack of funds, high prices for raw materials, substantial taxes on handloom products, and fluctuations in customer demand. Only 2% suggested eliminating middlemen from the supply chain. Most respondents (92%) were aware of government policies however, 50% failed to avail themselves of government assistance in case of need. Overall, the survey highlights the necessity for effective government policies and training programs to enhance Tripura's handloom sector.

N. Chandru & Ms. S. Kavya (2025) studied 160 Handloom weavers, co-operative members, and related government officials in Tamil Nadu. They found that declining interest among younger generations, threatens the continuity of traditional weaving practices. Financial difficulties, high raw material costs, and competition from machine-made textiles have placed significant pressure on small weavers too. Modernizing the handloom sector while preserving traditional techniques is the best approach for sustaining the industry as well expanding e-commerce, improving branding efforts, strengthening direct market linkages, and organizing national and international fairs have proven to be highly effective.

Jhulan Barik (2025) in Subarnapur district, Odisha studied 60 handloom weavers and found that the average monthly income of handloom weavers is considered low comparing to global standards household income. Among the studied weavers only

40% are satisfied with the remuneration received per unit of saree produced. Majority preferred to work under master weavers because of the availability of raw materials. The study lacks in-depth analysis about income and details about the remuneration being paid to weavers. Those who are not working under master weavers, how they are facing the vulnerability context in term of rising cost of raw materials, market is also not highlighted.

Mudavath Shiva Naik & Indrakanti Sekhar (2024) conducted in depth study at Mothkur Village in Telangana. The interviews with 11 handloom weavers revealed that many of them face economic challenges, including low income and financial instability. They are dependent on other individuals or intermediaries for work, indicating a lack of independence and autonomy in their work. They further mentioned that government support be an opportunity for the weavers.

Josinta Zinia & Esfaara Mim (2023) conducted Focus Group Discussion (FGD) among 15 weavers at Bohorum, Chapainawabgonj in Bangladesh and found that they faced a harsh life and have no other skill or assets. They are also vulnerable as they can't overcome the sudden pandemic and the inflation easily moreover their monthly wage also low. If the concerned ministry prioritise the weaver by giving more importance, help in export market and increase wage then only handloom sector will exist if not there will no weavers and no handloom in near future.

3. Methodology

The study is a qualitative approach with the objectives of understanding the challenges and prospects of Sustainable Livelihood of the handloom weavers of Leimapokpam Village, Manipur, India. Leimapokpam Village under Bishnupur District in Manipur is known for wangkhei phee weaving. Wangkhei phee having a Geographical Indication Tag has its own identity and value in textile market. The weave fabric has many applicability in attire, upholster and furnishing etc. To meet the objectives of the study, the data were collected based on the Sustainable Livelihood Framework developed by the UK Department for International Development. Primary data from 100 women weavers were collected with the tool i.e. interview schedule questions including both close and open-ended questions. Secondary data were collected from journals, books, report etc. The study used

descriptive statistics, frequency, percentage, average to outline the results.

4. Result And Discussion

Challenges for sustainable livelihood of the handloom weavers-

Vulnerability context- The rising cost of raw materials is a common issue among the independent weavers who doesn't have enough capital to stock their raw materials at the same time handling the inflation. There is a fluctuation in market demand of wangkhei phee due to seasonal demand i.e. high during marriage season and lai haraoba ritual festivals which is a challenge to the weaver's daily regular means of earning. The middle men/trader does play a big role in this village because the demand, raw material and even the design and motif is usually decided by the middle men.

Livelihood Assets

Human capital is those assets which play a crucial role to sustain the livelihood. It is a fact that having a good health, consuming nutritious foods, acquiring desire education, having required knowledge and skills, capacity to work, capacity to adapt can made the person efficient and effective. During the study it was found that majority (87%) of the weavers have eyes, shoulder and back pain. From morning 9 am to 11 am and 12 noon to 2 pm they weave, does reeling of yarn, prepares warp yarn for weaving. Some of them also work till 11 pm at night. As a result, they feel pain and ache in their body. Traditionally and commonly women does most of the household chores in Manipur which again worsen the ache.

The weavers said they learned weaving skill and knowledge from their childhood by helping their parents and grandparents. The entire studied weaver said they didn't get any kind of formal training as it is their hereditary occupations as well inter-generational transfer of knowledge. And they also stated that they don't have any other skill beside weaving. And this lack of skill is threat for them to make their livelihood sustainable even if they want to switch some other job. Some (22%) of the weaver have the skill of paddy seedling transplanting so they get wages during paddy cultivation i.e. May to July.

As we know that education is one of the best human capitals. However, weaving doesn't seek much

education. And it can also be seen that most of the respondent studied till higher secondary.

Social capital- This emphasis on the relationship between the people, networks, mutual trust and norms that facilitates cooperation and collective action within a society, contributing to social cohesion and economic development. During the study it was observed that the neighbour weavers help each other when they fell sick or any unforeseen emergency arises. This is especially when they have a work order taken and due date of delivery is fixed.

Some (45%) of the weavers are members of the Self Help Groups (SHGs). Those members of the same group have a collective bonding and more mutual understanding which create a sense of trust, respect for collective action. A study by **Sushnata Goswami (2024)** also expressed that many weaving enterprises operate as cooperatives or self-help groups, fostering a sense of community and collective ownership among weavers. These organizations not only provide economic benefits but also create platforms for social interaction, skill sharing, and mutual support.

The kind of trust and connectedness the weaver has made with the middlemen /traders is also acting as a backbone for their livelihood activity at present. Regarding taking loan from financial institution they don't want to apply because of the lengthy official procedure. So, there is a lack of trust and connectedness towards financial institutions.

Natural capital- From intangible public goods such as the atmosphere and biodiversity to divisible assets used directly for production (trees, land, etc.) comprises of natural capital. The weavers have their own land in their husband names or their own names on which they made a house. Those lands are their ancestral land. Some (45%) of them have paddy field as a result, they can cultivate crops and vegetables. The water supply system is in the form pipe line supplied by government.

The village have a *luwanglei* or *leinambi* river, lake named *Sana pat* and a small hillock (*chingphu ching*). The surrounding is green, clean and less polluted comparing to sub urban village. From the lake the villager can also earn means of living by selling lotus, lotus leaf, lotus seed, lotus root and small fishes. Long back the *Sana pat* (lake) is a common property own by the whole village but now it is divided to individual villagers.

Physical capital- It includes the housing, electricity, sanitation, water supply, livestock, vehicles and transportation etc. All of the respondents have their own house and those houses were pucca or kutcha house and their sanitation is also good. Few (10) of the respondents have livestock namely cows and hen or duck. They milk their cows in early morning and sale the produce at the village level or main Imphal market. The cattle are usually sent to nearby *Sana pat* (lake) and surrounding for grazing. Such physical capital aids in their livelihood, a means of living.

Financial capital- Financial capital is the most crucial to determine one's livelihood. The studied handloom weavers are vulnerable in this capital because they are dependent on middle men/trader for their main livelihood activity i.e. weaving. Averagely they get a monthly income of Rs.12000 to Rs.18000 per month. It is difficult to manage the household basic needs with such an income only. If they want to take loan also the interest rate is too high and some money lender seeks collateral. This finding aligned with study by **(Priyabrata Panda & Kanchan Bhuwania (2022))** mentioning that Weavers' socio-economic condition symptomatized by low pay, unemployment, lack of demand, low working capital.

Transforming structures and policies-They provide incentives that stimulate people to make better choices. During the study it was found that the existing structures and policies are vulnerable for the weavers. There's no direct connection with the showroom owner or main seller. They don't have access to e-market and doesn't know the technical knowhow of virtual market. This finding is aligned with the finding of **Shivukumar Baliger (2025)** stating that many weavers lack digital literacy and depend on middlemen for sales.

Livelihood strategy-They take advance money from the middle men/trader if there is emergency need of money because they don't have enough savings. Once again, they are vulnerable since the ability to cope up with the problem they face is an issue to gain sustainability. They don't have other skill which they can switch over their job also. Those (10%) who have the skill of paddy seedlings transplanting is meant for few work days only too.

Livelihood outcome-The handloom weavers are working for a long hour. They need about 8, 15 and 20 days to weave design with border only, border with simple motif and full work respectively. But the income

isn't appraising for the entire respondent weaver still, they are doing the weaving activity with hope and zeal. The findings of the study relates with the findings of **(Mudavath Shiva Naik & Indrakanti Sekhar (2024))** mentioning that despite these challenges, the weavers exhibit immense resilience, creativity, and dedication to their craft. The product wangkhei phee in Manipur is also gaining its market demand and in fashion trend in the region.

Prospects-

The wangkhei phee with intricate border designs, and distinctive weaving patterns and motifs making each piece a work of art and talks about the rich unique rich cultural heritage of Manipur. The wangkhei phee have been permitted a GI tag, which legally realizes its peculiarity and origin. The concerned department or ministry if prioritise the handloom sector in term of export market then only the weavers livelihood will be more sustainable. The weave fabric can be used as dress materials as well as in upholster furnishings. The wangkhei sari which is popular among the saris in India is also a choice of every women wardrobe. The weaver be given loan with subsidy to buy loom, tools and equipment. They can avail weaver card, yarn bank card, artisan card facilities and keep in touch with the concerned district official staffs. They should not concentrate only in local specific product, they can diversify the fabric applicability by increasing and decreasing weft yarn easily. Time to time they can be given training on design, consumer choices to enhance their marketing thereby livelihood sustainability. **Vaibbhavi Pruthviraj Ranavaade (2021)** also commented that Craft design education and consumer awareness would increase sensitivity to changing markets scenarios.

Conclusion:

The livelihood sustainability of a weaver is a concerned because they don't have enough capitals or savings and no other skill to maintain sustainable living. The level of formal education they have is also not desirable for other jobs as well suffering with the low wage. Their monthly income can't support a whole family. The weavers depended on middle men/trader for the raw material and marketing of their products. The study itself suggests that the government should provide financial support, subsidies and provides inputs cheaply to the weavers. Training to the weavers about the modern way of weaving for better productivity and

diversification may make it sustainable as a livelihood for handloom weavers. From the environment point context, Handloom weaving is energy efficient. Since its manual labor based and not industrial machinery, it reduces the consumption of electricity and fossil fuels. Handloom textiles are a cornerstone of sustainable fashion, offering a harmonious blend of environmental sustainability, social equity, and cultural richness.

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